



ISLAND IN THE SUN*

Creatures of Duality

Islands are creatures of duality. Their history and culture, as well as their socio-economic system, are characterized by a perennial dialectic between the global and local; tradition and growth; diversity and unity; community and identity; economic and ecological; not to mention, dependence and independence; and escape and isolation. Or in the words of Harry Belafonte, *this is my island in the sun, where my people have toiled since time begun; I may sail many a sea, but her shores will always be home to me.*

Islandness emphasizes the mutual and complex interdependencies that exist amongst the various systems, i.e., the region, the destination, the community; and the economic, social, cultural, political and ecological sub-systems. Size matters when the interaction of these systems defines the behavior and sustainability of an island in the face

of external turbulence and internal agility. Sustainable dynamic equilibrium is achieved when systems perform reciprocally.

The case of Aruba is a remarkable story of island resilience and overcoming strategic challenges through different tourism episodes, or phases of qualitative transformation. What started out in the early 20th century as a casual affair, has today evolved into an extraordinary vibrant industry, in which tourism accounts directly and indirectly for well over 50% of our gross domestic product and labor market. While the numbers are certainly impressive, and whereas the value of tourism is often quantified, the true measure of sustainability lies beneath the surface.

The Quest for Sustainability

The quest for sustainability is not primarily about the tangi-

ble or hard growth in tourism in terms of arrivals, economic receipts, tax revenues, labor production or even infrastructure expansion. Yes, these are all 'nice to haves', but they are not the 'must haves'. The case of Aruba demonstrates that the quest for sustainability lies in the recognition and realization of island potentialities, and more importantly, the qualitative transformation of an island community in social, cultural, economic and political dimensions. Throughout the Aruban history and the different tourism episodes, two strategic processes emerge as imperatives to sustaining isles of tourism, i.e., the *dynamic socialization* and the *political institutionalization* of tourism.

The *dynamic socialization* of tourism describes the mutual and interdependent relationships between tourism and the community, involving tourists, investors, citizens and other stakeholders.



In the case of Aruba, different factors enabled tourism socialization, ranging from community openness, island intimacy, indigenous (Indian) hospitality, native (creative) skills and knowledge, to rich cultural and linguistic (code-switching) heritage, and high-quality natural assets. In later episodes of development, tourism socialization was stimulated by community acceptance and involvement, local entrepreneurship, and creative cultural diversity.

In order to sustain isles of tourism, the history of Aruba also testifies to the importance of *political institutionalization*, or the creation of an institutional environment of trust, collaboration, policy intelligence and integrity. While these factors are often interpreted as synonymous with tourism policy, plans, government regulations, industry directives, and/or strategies, the case of Aruba indicates a process through which power is wielded, policy and political agendas are shaped, problems are interpreted, conflicts are resolved, coalitions are built, solutions are shaped, decisions are postponed, and results are rationalized in ex-post fashion.

Throughout the different episodes of tourism development, several ephemeral for-

ces have traditionally shaped the Aruban political economy, ranging from political stability, community trust, and clan-like structures, to strategic foresight, shared vision, public-private networks, and institutional learning. History indicates that where tourism has succeeded or failed, it has been primarily a function of political and institutional (in-)action.

Awakenings

As small-island tourism economies venture deeper into the 21st century, they face considerable complexity and uncertainty, which will require nothing less than a tectonic shift in rethinking and redesigning economies, without losing sight of the island-specific socio-political environment. Island communities can no longer indulge in superficial tourism affairs, nor can they afford to stand still, while growth envelops their islandness. Decades of reliance on traditional resources and conventional mechanisms, are giving way to a new reality, where 'business as always' and 'politics as usual' will not suffice. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, *if we open a quarrel between the past and the present, we shall find that we have lost the future.*

The future of tourism development in small-island communities depends on the speed of unlearning, and the de-institutionalization of existing paradigms and praxis. Unless we recognize that tourism and eco-

nomic systems are embedded and bounded by social structures (not vice-versa!), which are influenced and shaped by a political system of multiple actors, sustainable tourism will remain an oxymoron, and a figment of the imagination, forever fleeting. *I pray the day will never come, when we cannot awake to the sound of drum; never let us miss carnival, with calypso songs philosophical*, as Harry Belafonte so eloquently sings.

We are not bearers of the past, but stewards of the future...

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** Original title adapted from the novel by Alec Waugh (1955), and movie theme song by Harry Belafonte (1957). The philosophy and contents of this article were previously presented to the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO), and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). All rights reserved.*